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Dorothy and Thomas Hoobler, *The Crimes of Paris: A True Story of Murder, Theft, & Detectives*. Lincoln University of Nebraska Press, 2009. vi + 376 pp. \$19.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN-13: 978-0803234321.

Review by Scott Haine, The University of Maryland University College.

In the autumn of 1986 in *French Historical Studies*, Karen Offen sounded an alarm. In “Reflections on the Publishing Crisis in French History,” she warned the “future publishing of books in French history by American scholars may be in jeopardy.”[1] Yet twenty-five years later—despite a severe recession, the consequent downsizing of academic publishing, and a growing emphasis on world and global history—French history is doing well. This is especially the case with the history of Paris, evidenced by David McCullough’s *The Greater Journey: Americans in Paris*, which was number one on the New York Times best seller list through much of the summer.[2] This book, by one of the leading American historians, is merely the latest in a long list of recent books on Paris—including those from Patrice Higonnet, Colin Jones, Charles Rearick, and especially Graham Robb—that has had a high profile and wide distribution.[3]

Into the thriving field of Parisian studies steps the astute, prolific, and accomplished spousal writing team of Dorothy Law Hoobler and Thomas Hoobler. Neither has a Ph.D. in history. She has a Master’s degree in history from New York University and he has one in education from Xavier University. But they have written over sixty works of history over the last thirty years, focusing especially on historical biographies both for children and adolescents ranging from their first, *Frontier Diary*, which appeared with Macmillan in 1975 and explores the life of a woman in the late 1830s, to a biography of Zhou Enlai with an introduction by Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., published by Chelsea House in 1986.[4] They have also contributed to “Her Story,” a series of female biographies with Silver Burdett Press, and the “Family Album” series with Oxford University Press. Their books have won a variety of awards, from the Society for School Librarians International (1991), the Carter G. Woodson Honor Book (1997), to the Edgar Allen Poe Award for best young-adult mystery (2005).

They now are moving into the adult market. They have recently done a well-reviewed—*Publisher’s Weekly* and *Booklist* for example—biography of Mary Shelly and now, with this study of various thefts, murders, and crimes, they move into French and Parisian history.[5] This book was also published in hardback by Little Brown and had its paperback rights bought by University of Nebraska Press for their ongoing series on French history.

As one might expect from writers who have honed their ability to hold the attention of primary and secondary school readers, this book is well-written, fluent, and indeed hard to put down, although not always for the right reason from the perspective of a French historian, as we shall see. The reviews noted on the back cover of the paperback quote reviewers from *The Washington Post* and *The Minneapolis Star Tribune* and best-selling crime novelist, Michael Connelly. The latter praised the book as “irresistibly engrossing.” But not all reviews have been so lavish. The critic in *Time* found the Hoobler’s prose “more workmanlike” in comparison to another book on the history of crime in Paris, R.A. Scotti’s *Vanished Smile: The Mysterious Theft of Mona Lisa*. [6] I believe the real weakness is not in their prose, however, but in their lack of a clear focus and a penchant for speculation in the conclusion, rather than fully explicating important points they have accumulated.

As far as the research goes, these generalists are simply not familiar with the French archives, although they do have a good, if not comprehensive, grasp of the secondary literature. In their one-page acknowledgement after the conclusion, they do cite a researcher who did work in the archives of the Prefecture of Police, but they list no sources. Their narrative shows a good grasp of much of the secondary literature, including this reviewer's book on the working-class cafés of Paris, but some major gaps are apparent, such as the works of Bob Nye, Ruth Harris and Dominique Kalifa, beyond his recent article in *French Historical Studies*.^[7] This is one of the few journal articles cited.

How should a scholar outside of the discipline of French history approach the field? A superb model can be found in Douglas Starr's *The Killer of Little Shepherds: A True Crime Story and the Birth of Forensic Science*.^[8] The distinguished author of *Blood: An Epic History of Medicine and Commerce* and professor of journalism, science and medical journalism at Boston University, Starr spent months both in France and among French historians at Yale in order to understand French history from inside as much as possible within a short period of time and Starr details this in an extended acknowledgment section.^[9]

Nevertheless, the Hooblers' effort is a welcome mass-market addition to the rich and flourishing bibliography on fin-de-siècle and Belle Époque studies of crime, media, and nationalism that continues to attract scholars. One of the best indications that Offen's fear was exaggerated was the great success of Edward Berenson's *The Trial of Madame Caillaux* which not only sold well, but also became a model for books on Parisian crime, media, and politics that have continued to appear in great numbers ever since.^[10]

Some of the latest examples include Kate Cambor's *Gilded Youth: Three Lives in France's Belle Époque*—now also in a French edition published by Flammarion—and Venita Datta's *Heroes and Legends of Fin-de-Siècle France: Gender, Politics, and National Identity*.^[11] Cambor, a Harold Bloom student, constructs a group portrait of the Hugo, Charcot and Daudet families, tracing their fortunes from the eminence of their most famous members in the mid- to late-nineteenth century to the fragile celebrity of less accomplished but still famous members of the fin-de-siècle and Belle Époque generation. Datta, already distinguished by a superb study of the birth of the modern French intellectual, *The Birth of a National Icon* ^[12], now composes a set of brilliant case studies—ranging from the Bazar de la Charité fire of 1897 through a consideration of elite and popular theatre including an analysis of Cyrano de Bergerac, the Napoleonic legend, the Joan of Arc in popular legend and culture, and the Ullmo spy scandal of 1907–1908—in order to show how Parisian culture created myths that would help sustain the nation during the trials of the coming world wars. Datta deftly uses Benedict Anderson's insights into the “imagined community” of nationalism and Edward Berenson and Eva Giloi's study of the construction of charisma to illuminate the construction and diffusion of these mythic images.^[13]

The Hooblers bring their narrative verve into this innovative and thriving field, weaving together a compelling tapestry of crime cases between 1900 and 1914. Even though the plot lacks focus in the later chapters and they never develop an analytical perspective like the historians cited above, their points about the relationship between cubist art and the development of camouflage during World War I that they note at the end of their book are suggestive of a possible theoretical development that I shall explain at the end of this review. But most of all, the ordinary reader wishes to know how it will all turn out. *The Crimes of Paris* opens with the theft of the *Mona Lisa*. No worker at the Louvre realized its disappearance until hours later, because each official believed some other staff member had it. Here I believe the Hooblers should note that whoever stole the painting was a master of camouflage—that is, of blending in with the surroundings. This accomplished writing team then embeds the theft in a rich contextual overview of fin-de-siècle and Belle Époque Paris. We know the highlights of late nineteenth-century Paris (the broad boulevards; the luxurious cafés; café concerts; cabarets, and dancehalls [all populated by those modern pedestrian consumers of city life, the *flâneurs*, and increasing numbers of *flâneuses* displaying the revolutions in women's fashion after 1900]; the international expositions of 1889 and 1900; the rise of public cinema on the grands boulevards; the menacing Apaches in the peripheral

arrondissements; the extremes of wealth and poverty; the eruption of modern ideological causes such as anarchism), but their choice of dynamic detail makes this rereading delightful.

Out of this complex cultural mosaic, the Hooblers make some illuminating connections. They first focus on the poet and coiner of the term “surrealism,” Guillaume Apollinaire, and on Pablo Picasso, the co-inventor of cubism with George Braque, both of whom were initially under suspicion for the theft. They then juxtapose the runaway success of novels concerning a ruthless criminal, Fantômas—apotheosized by Apollinaire as a popular expression of the new modernist sensibility—with the criminologist Alphonse Bertillon, then at the height of his fame for a complex system of body measurement intended to identify criminals in order to remove all ambiguity from criminal prosecution. They then compare Picasso’s success at expanding artistic boundaries with Bertillon’s failure both to catch the thief of the *Mona Lisa* and to establish the superiority of his method of criminal identification over the newer and simpler technique of fingerprints.

Succeeding chapters focus on contextualizing this theft within the nineteenth-century French fascination with the culture of crime. We discover that the Parisian press immediately turned the theft into a pervasive media event. From cinema newsreels to cabaret songs, cigarette papers and corset ads, the theft became a ubiquitous part of the atmosphere of the City of Light. The Hooblers then explore the French empathy, from the time of the Revolution, for figures such as the criminal-turned-pioneering-detective like Vidocq and such charismatic, enigmatic figures as Lacenaire and Fantômas (as opposed to the resolutely righteous Sherlock Holmes). Rather than the definitive truth that the Baker street sage always delivered, French crime literature focused on the shifting boundaries between truth and fiction in both crime and literature. They then chart the rise of French criminology in France through such detectives and Parisian prefects of police as Canler, Tardieu, Mace, Lacassange and Lepine.

This overview sets the stage for a chapter devoted to the career of Alphonse Bertillon and his system that brought early, worldwide renown and success, but ultimately would prove to be a dead-end. The next chapter explores the manner in which Apollinaire and Picasso met and assimilated the new cultural currents of the era: ranging from primitive art (exemplified by the “Phoenician statuettes” that Picasso bought after they had been stolen from the Louvre) to the new theories of space and time developed by Albert Einstein, Max Planck, and Henri Poincaré and to anarchism, both individual and political. The Hooblers show that cafés—along with the painter’s studio, billiard parlors, and dancehalls—were at the center of crisscrossing intellectual currents of art, politics, and science. They quote Max Jacob at length about Apollinaire meeting Picasso for the first time at a bar on the rue Amsterdam. Out of conversations that crackled with both innovation and contention, Picasso and Apollinaire crafted a new conception and practice of modern art.

At this point, their narrative loses cogency. We shift from Apollinaire reflecting on the crime he did not commit to “[r]eal criminals [who] were plotting a modernist crime” (p. 207). In their analysis of the anarchist-inspired Bonnot gang—who invented the getaway car by fusing the automobile with bank robbing—the Hooblers ably summarize Richard Parry’s excellent book on the gang in terms of their actions, but ignore the wider radical political anarchist milieu that stemmed from the Paris Commune and that Parry explores.^[14] Suddenly the next chapter confronts us with the actual thief. After all the romantic mythologizing, the culprit turned out to be an Italian immigrant house painter and carpenter working at the Louvre who had used his skills to craft a protective covering for the icon and then steal it without any questions asked. Vincenzo Perugia justified his crime as an act of nationalism. Instead of this central question, the Hooblers focus on the failures of the press and criminological establishment. In their obsession with celebrity and drama, the possibility of a humble artisan stealing the masterpiece seemed inconceivable. As a humble worker at the Louvre, the police had also let Perugia slip undetected through their grid of surveillance.

Rather than explore the implications of this brilliant case of hiding in plain sight, the Hooblers proclaim: "But Paris had many more crimes to offer—including two spectacular murder cases—and though few knew it, the Mona Lisa case was not quite closed either" (p. 267). The two cases involved Marguerite Steinhall and Henriette Caillaux. Although still lively, this is the weakest chapter of the book. The authors rely heavily on the previous studies by Benjamin Martin and Edward Berenson and do not focus sufficiently on the gender dynamics of these cases, although they do note (drawing on Ann-Louise Shapiro's study of women's crime in Paris) that women defendants in Parisian courts often became minor celebrities and that women composed a high percentage of the audiences at the assize trials.[15] But the Hooblers do not develop the insights of Mary Louise Roberts' work on Sarah Bernhardt and other "disruptive acts" by feminists, though they cite her work. Roberts' notion of women's "disruptive acts"—ones that break gender norms and stereotypes—as she shows in the case of Sarah Bernhardt and other women connected with the print, theatre, and film media of the Belle Epoque, would have proved useful to the Hooblers as they analyze these women's highly publicized trials.[16]

The last chapter regains focus. Its superb title, "The Greatest Crime," refers to their legitimate contention that the Great War was the culmination of a growing media-inflated fascination for crime. Berenson and other historians have naturally made this same argument, but never so explicitly. They also superbly connect the *Mona Lisa's* theft to modernism, noting that, in 1919, on the 400th anniversary of Leonardo's painting, Marcel Duchamp used the occasion for one of his masterstrokes of iconoclasm: adding a mustache and goatee to the icon. The theft and media blitz that followed, they argue, had made the painting even more ripe for transgression.

But to my mind, the best part of this last chapter concerns one of the original suspects, Picasso. This returns us to the worker at the Louvre being able to steal the painting in plain sight. Were not his actions the perfect "camouflage" for a thief? Unfortunately the Hooblers do not make this point or make the connection between this and two quotes about camouflage in art and war that grace their conclusion. The first quote was from "(t)he French officer credited with inventing camouflage, Guirand de Scevola, [who] explained his inspiration [in this way]: 'In order to totally deform objects, I employed the means of Cubists used to represent them'" (p. 307). The second quotation is from Gertrude Stein, recounting a comment by Picasso: "I very well remember at the beginning of the war being with Picasso on the Boulevard Raspail when the first camouflaged truck passed. It was at night, we had heard of camouflage but we had not yet seen it and Picasso, amazed, looked at it and then cried out, yes it is he who made it, that is cubism" (pp. 312-313).

If the Hooblers had developed and nuanced these connections between the theft, art, and technology, their book would have made a singular contribution to a crowded field. Instead they tenuously resurrect—in an aptly named afterward, "The Mastermind"—a long ignored and discredited story—as Scotti does a fine job confirming—of an American journalist who identified the "true" perpetrator of the theft as a shadowy Latin American adventurer.[17]

"That mystery has yet to be solved," is the last sentence of the book. The Hooblers are referring to the possible connection between the shadowy Latin American adventurer and the theft. But their book would have been stronger if they had, instead, pondered Picasso's ruminations on the links between cubism and camouflage and their own point that "It took an artist, like a detective, to find that hidden reality" (p. 198). In short, elaborate on the links between art, science, popular culture, modern urban life, and modern war. Recently, in my online classes on twentieth-century Europe, I have cited the Picasso and Stein quotes from *The Crime of Paris* and had responses such as the following one: "I never thought of camouflage being inspired by cubism. That is so interesting. My husband walks around in his army ACUs everyday. I don't think I'll ever look at them quite the same." A book whose insights can produce this sort of response among students is indeed a book that is worth reading and assigning.

NOTES

- [1] Karen Offen, "Reflections on the Publishing Crisis in French History," in FHS Forum: Publishing French History, *French Historical Studies* 14/4(Autumn 1986): 591-595.
- [2] David McCullough, *The Greater Journey: Americans in Paris* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011).
- [3] Patrice L.R. Higonnet, *Paris: Capital of the World*, transl. by Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002); Colin Jones, *Paris: The Biography of a City* (London: Allen Lane, 2004); Charles Rearick, *Pleasures of the Belle Époque: Entertainment and Festivity in Turn-of-the-Century France* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985); Graham Robb, *Parisians: An Adventure History of Paris* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010).
- [4] Dorothy and Thomas Hoobler, *Frontier Diary* (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 1975) and *Zhou Enlai* (New York: Chelsea House, 1986).
- [5] Dorothy and Thomas Hoobler, *The Monsters: Mary Shelly and the Curse of Frankenstein* (Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown and Company, 2006; Boston, Mass.: Back Bay Books, 2007).
- [6] Richard Lacayo, "Art's Great Whodunit: The *Mona Lisa* Theft of 1911," *Time Magazine* (27 April 2009); R.A. Scotti, *Vanished Smile: The Mysterious Theft of Mona Lisa* (New York: Knopf, 2009).
- [7] Robert A. Nye, *Crime, Madness and Politics in Modern France: The Medical Concept of National Decline* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984); Ruth Harris, *Murders and Madness: Medicine, Law, and Society in the Fin de Siècle* (Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); and Dominique Kalifa, "Crime Scenes: Criminal Topography and Social Imaginary in Nineteenth-Century Paris," *French Historical Studies* 27/1(Winter 2004): 175-194; Dominique Kalifa, *L'encre et le sang: récits de crimes et société à la Belle Époque* (Paris: Fayard, 1995).
- [8] Douglas Starr, *The Killer of Little Shepherds: A True Crime Story and the Birth of Forensic Science* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011).
- [9] Douglas Starr, *Blood: An Epic History of Medicine and Commerce* (New York: Knopf, 1998).
- [10] Edward Berenson, *The Trial of Madame Caillaux* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).
- [11] Kate Cambor, *Gilded Youth: Three Lives in France's Belle Époque* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2009); Venita Datta, *Heroes and Legends of Fin-de-Siècle France: Gender, Politics, and National Identity* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).
- [12] Venita Datta, *Birth of a National Icon: The Literary Avant-Garde and the Origins of the Intellectual in France* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999).
- [13] Edward Berenson and Eva Giloi, eds., *Constructing Charisma: Celebrity, Fame, and Power in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (New York: Berghan Books, 2010).
- [14] Richard Parry, *The Bonnot Gang: The Story of the French Illegalists* (London: Rebel Press, 1987).
- [15] Benjamin F. Martin, *The Hypocrisy of Justice in the Belle Époque* (Baton Rouge, Miss.: Louisiana State University Press, 1984); Berenson, *The Trial of Madame Caillaux*; Ann-Louise Shapiro, *Breaking the Codes: Female Criminality in Fin-de-Siècle Paris* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1996).

[16] Mary Louise Roberts, *Disruptive Acts: The New Woman in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Chicago, Ill.: The University of Chicago Press, 2002).

[17] Scotti, *Vanished Smile*, pp. 209-218.

Scott Haine
The University of Maryland University College
shaine@aol.com

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Excerpted from *The Crimes of Paris: A True Story of Murder, Theft, and Detection*, by Dorothy and Thomas Hoobler, to be published this month by Little, Brown and Company; © 2009 by the authors. It was a Monday and the Louvre was closed. As was standard practice at the museum on that day of the week, only maintenance workers, cleaning staff, curators, and a few other employees roamed the cavernous halls of the building that was once the home of France's kings but for centuries had been devoted to housing the nation's art treasures. Also on VF.com: How Jacqueline Kennedy brought the Mona Lisa to Am